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Shakespeare and Modern Christianity

by Nathan Meno

(English 2228)

For generations upon generations, the works of William Shakespeare have tantalized readers with a certain majestic appeal that can be attributed to no other writer. Shakespeare's plasticity lies in the fact that his writings have proven to be timeless pieces of treasure that hold a universal appeal. Throughout the course of many of his plays, Shakespeare in particular expresses an alert awareness of the qualities and consequences of Christianity. One key ingredient that makes Shakespeare's work applicable to many societies throughout the world today is his expression of this religious awareness through plays such as *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear*. We now find ourselves in a world that hinges itself on the delicacy of religious worldviews. The attack on the World Trade Center was made in the name of God. America's current presence in Iraq is prominently buttressed by President Bush's declaration of war on evil, a battle plan that stresses the use of American soldiers as agents for God. One might safely bring forth the conclusion that religious worldviews are now the currency for many of the world's moral transactions. This is why the timelessness of Shakespeare's take on Christianity lies in the timeliness of his views. Shakespeare's view on Christianity can be considered a major part of his timelessness because its relevance to the modern day Christian belief system. First, Shakespeare addresses the problem of ethnic hatred fueled by religion. The current standoff between Christians and Muslims can be considered a modern-day adaptation to the Christians' hatred toward Jews in *The Merchant of Venice*. Next, Shakespeare captures the beauty of Christ's message by relating some of the same postmodern concepts of Christianity that are being implemented in churches today. Shakespeare is able to personify the current transformation of Christianity from a tradition based religion to a more youth-friendly, postmodern practice. He succeeds in doing this through characters such as Cordelia, who is a Christ-like figure representing love and forgiveness, as opposed to judgmental qualities shown by characters such as Isabella in *Measure for Measure*.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare introduces the concept of ethnic hatred fueled by religion, an ordeal that has made its presence known throughout the landscape of each passing generation. In the play, Shylock is discriminated against because of his ethnicity and religion. The simple fact that Shylock is a Jew is enough for Venetian Christians like Bassanio to ostracize and slander him. While Shylock exhibits certain unattractive qualities that serve as catalysts for his mistreatment, these particular mistreatments are unfairly wrapped up with a bow and presented to Shylock as a consequence for being a Jew. This concept is most accurately personified in Shylock's declaration of equality:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, Senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, Subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the Same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die. (3.1.57-65)

Shakespeare points out the fact that both Jews and Christians are humans by highlighting certain attributes of nature that each person is able to feel, completely disregarding their ethnicity. Shakespeare implies that religion, especially Christianity, is something that is meant to bring people

together. However, the Christians in *The Merchant of Venice* use their religion as a justification for their abysmal behavior. The Venetian Christians view themselves as potential saviors to the Jews, viewing their own discriminatory behavior as an act of kindness and unwarranted love. Lorenzo provides instance of this when he declares his intention to take Jessica from her father's home. He views his actions as necessary for Jessica's salvation, and conveys his course of action as an act of mercy:

I must needs tell thee all. She hath directed how I shall take her from her father's house, what gold and jewels she is furnished with, what page's suit she hath in readiness. If e'er the Jew her father come to heaven, it will be for his gentle daughter's sake; and never dare misfortune cross her foot unless she do it under this excuse, that she is issue to a faithless Jew. (2.4.33.41)

The religious hatred that the Venetian Christians have for Shylock the Jew is similar to the present day hatred a good majority of Christians and Muslims have for each other. One modern day Christian scholar attributes this religious hatred to a curse. When judgment against God turns into judgment against us, it produces shame. When shame is produced, the judgments begin to pile up, this time against others. Judging others is another way to hide the disappointments one has with oneself (Boyd 163). The religious hatred being expressed between Christians and Muslims today is a direct result of this judgment. Also, in *The Merchant of Venice*, this judgment is made readily apparent by the actions and words of Christians like Lorenzo. Shylock is a scapegoat for the unexplainable injustices that Lorenzo and his fellow Christians witness, both in their society and within themselves. They fall short of their own religious standards, and therefore must perceive themselves as better than somebody else to justify their religious stature.

One of the key elements contributing to Christianity's current transitional phase is that of postmodernism as opposed to traditionalism. Traditionalism stresses a ritualistic approach to Christianity, while postmodernism stresses the implementation of updated mechanisms capable of sharing Christ's message with a new age audience. Perhaps the most important element of postmodern Christianity is the notion of love over all (Boyd 48). Postmodernists point to Jesus' words from the Gospel pertaining to love for others. There are many instances when Jesus and his disciples are met with violent words capable of shearing their way directly to the center of a human heart. However, instead of violent reactions to these particular actions, Jesus stresses the reaction of undeserved love. Jesus epitomizes this concept himself by dying on a cross, fulfilling a punishment that we ourselves could not bear. Shakespeare manages to transcend multiple generations by his use of this postmodern concept in *King Lear*. When Cordelia maintains every right for retribution and revenge on her father, she instead chooses to forgive him by demonstrating a love so profound that she has since been labeled a Christ-like figure. Just as Jesus and his disciples were met with unjustifiable causticity, Cordelia has been banished by her father for expressing her beautiful, honest love. She is given the opportunity for revenge later on in the play, but instead decides to envelope her father with the same type of love that Jesus teaches to his disciples. When every ounce of hatred pertaining to her father would be justified, Cordelia instead expresses holy love:

O my dear father, restoration hang they medicine on my lips, and let this kiss repair those violent harms that my two sisters have in thy reverence made. (4.7.32-4)

Despite all of the pain Lear has unrightfully dealt Cordelia, she is able to have an increasing sense of love for her father because she knows that Christ died for all. Cordelia is able to subscribe unsurpassable worth to Lear, somebody who has lost everything (Boyd 49).

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare highlights the magnitude of this postmodern

concept of love by stressing the consequence of its absence. In Shylock's famous speech, there is a lingering sense of regret stemming from Shylock's justification for his own belief system. Shylock states that he is simply a person who has implemented what he has been taught. "The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction" (3.1.70-3).

Shylock's speech captures the travesty of religious hypocrisy by depicting its origin, that being Salarino the Christian. Shakespeare is able to pinpoint with precise accuracy the root cause for religious hatred. He is also able to offer a remedy for this hatred, that being the postmodern concept of love over all. Not only is religious hypocrisy a direct catalyst for hatred, it is also the key component to a well-documented Christian traditionalist implosion. One Christian researcher points out the alarming facts. Among young outsiders, eighty-four percent say that they know at least one committed Christian. However, just fifteen percent thought the lifestyle of these Christ followers were significantly different than the norm (Kinnaman 49). Shakespearian characters such as Lorenzo, Salarino, and Bassanio are severely accurate representations of the carriers of hypocrisy in today's society. Shakespeare accurately outlines the growing gap between the love of Jesus and Christian lifestyles found today by these young outsiders. His strategy in doing this lies in the positioning of his presentation.

Shakespeare juxtaposes two key postmodern stressors, forgiveness and love, against two mutinous ingredients of tragedy, judgment and retribution. By pitting these two opposites together throughout the course of his works, Shakespeare fully displays his knowledge of Christianity's current battlefield. The concept of revenge is accurately portrayed in *Measure for Measure* by Isabella, who proceeds to lie about her encounter with Angelo to the Duke:

I now begin with grief and shame to utter. He would not, but by gift of my chaste body to his concupiscible intemperate lust, release my brother; and after much debatement, my sisterly remorse confutes mine honour, and I did yield to him. (5.1.115-20)

Shakespeare personifies the ugliness of deceit by the twisted lies of Isabella, a religious figure herself, along with the Duke's impersonation of a friar. Isabella's deceitfulness is the direct result of a totalitarian mutation of Christianity. The Duke's transformation into a friar is a bastardization of a religious figure. The actions of both Isabella and the Duke epitomize the disintegration of religiosity. Instead of stressing love and forgiveness, the religious figures of Vienna attempt to intimidate their subjects by forcefully manipulating them with religious law. The direct result of this religious tug-of-war is the deceitfulness portrayed by Isabella and the Duke. This is Shakespeare's warning to future Christian generations. Unfortunately, Christians have failed to grasp Shakespeare's hidden truth and now find themselves in the midst of a religious war with hatred as the ammunition.

The study of Shakespeare's works goes far beyond the realms of literature and entertainment. For each play written, there is hidden gem of foresight pertaining to many aspects of modern day life. While Shakespeare's writings are highly decorated with magnificent language and ornamented verbs, the true beauty of Shakespeare lies within a time capsule, saving itself for future generations.

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